DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 273 554 SO 017 535

AUTHOR Rudd, Joel
TITLE Commercial and Advertising Content in Free Consumer Curriculum Materials.
PUB DATE 86
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (67th, San Francisco, CA, April 16-20, 1986).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Advertising; *Bias; Commercial Art; *Consumer Education; Elementary Secondary Education; *Instructional Material Evaluation; *Instructional Materials; *Marketing; *Merchandise Information; Merchandising

ABSTRACT

The results of the first systematic content analysis of free consumer curriculum materials indicate the extent to which such business sponsored materials are an advertising vehicle for their producers. The business sponsored materials in this sample of 116 items contain nearly twice as many advertising statements as the non-business materials. Reference to company and brand/model logos and names averaged 82 per item in the business sponsored materials. It is clear that these materials are largely vehicles for advertising and are not primarily intended to serve an educational function. Curriculum policy makers can no longer ignore the commercialization of their curricula through use of business sponsored materials. Efforts should be made to develop and disseminate to classroom teachers and policymakers improved guidelines for evaluating free consumer curriculum materials. (BZ)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED273554

Commercial and Advertising Content in Free Consumer Curriculum Materials

Joel Rudd

SP017535

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Joel Rudd

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Commercial and Advertising Content in Free Consumer Curriculum Materials

JOEL RUDD
University of Arizona

Joel Rudd
School of Family and
Consumer Resources
University of Arizona
Tucson, AZ 85721

An increasing proportion of consumer curriculum materials available for use in public schools is provided by the business community. Many financially strapped school systems have welcomed these (usually free) business-sponsored curriculum materials because these materials often technically superior to ordinary curriculum materials (e.g., high quality paper, numerous illustrations, etc.).

Critics have raised serious questions about the appropriateness of business-sponsored materials in public schools. Harty's (1979) seminal review of business-sponsored consumer materials concluded that many of them are largely "propaganda" and labeled the businesses which produce them as "hucksters in the classroom." Other critics have argued that business-sponsored materials promote the business cause through their heavy commercial content and their use of blatant advertising messages.

Free consumer curriculum materials used by teachers come from a variety of business (e.g., corporations, trade associations) and non-business sources (e.g., governments, non-profit organizations). For these types of materials, teachers serve as the primary gatekeepers within the educational environment. Research indicates that while many teachers perceive sponsors of free consumer curriculum materials as self-serving, teacher's abilities to identify biases vary widely (e.g., Dlabay 1982). Harty (1979) asserts that overworked and underpaid teachers have little time to systematically evaluate and filter all incoming material.

To what extent are business-sponsored consumer curriculum materials in fact promoting the products and services of their producers rather than providing unbiased (or at least balanced) consumer education for students? Do business-sponsored materials indeed contain more commercial and advertising content (both verbal and pictorial) than do consumer curriculum materials sponsored by non-business sources? We do not have an answer to these questions. Critics of business-sponsored materials have thus far relied entirely on Harty's (1979) review of such materials, which includes descriptive accounts of particularly objectionable examples. Harty's review stands alone in the literature as an attempt to describe advertising found in business-sponsored consumer curriculum materials. However, the value of Harty's review is limited by its lack of systematic content analysis of those materials. Harty's is an insightful and important, but impressionistic, review. Thus, the extent to which business-sponsored materials are or are not "propaganda" is in need of empirical verification.

The purpose of the present paper is to report results of the first systematic content analysis of free consumer curriculum materials. A number of hypotheses were developed and tested which predicted that business-sponsored curriculum materials would contain more commercial and advertising content than would materials from non-business sponsors.

A sample of free educational materials was selected from the **Elementary Teacher's Guide to Free Curriculum Materials** (Nehmer and Krey 1983). The sample was selected within the same consumer-relevant areas highlighted in Harty's [1979] study: nutrition, energy, and economics education. Within these subheadings, every fifth item was requested by mail from its respective sponsor. Thus the unit of measurement in the present analysis was the item, the natural unit employed by producers of free consumer curriculum materials. Appropriate operational definitions for the following categories were developed: Material sources (corporations, trade associations, government agencies, non-profit organizations), illustrations, logos, advertising statements, products, brands, and models.

Two coders were trained to do the content analysis on the sample material. (Training was done using materials other than those acquired for the study.) One coder analyzed the entire sample of materials; the second coder analyzed a randomly-selected subset of the materials (approximately 15 percent of the total sample). Inter-coder agreement on the mutually-coded 15 percent of the sample (88.5%) was considered sufficiently high to preclude having both coders analyze the entire sample.

Of the 142 educational material items requested from 103 material sponsors, 116 usable items were received from 86 sponsors for an 81.7 percent response rate (items) and an 83.5 percent response rate (sponsors). Statistical analysis (via one-tailed t-test) on the mean distribution of commercial and advertising content across material sources was performed. Business-sponsored materials were found to contain significantly more advertising statements than did non-business sponsored materials. In addition, business-sponsored materials contained significantly more references to brands/models and more company/brand logos and names than than did non-business sponsored materials.

The results of this analysis indicates clearly the extent to which business-sponsored free consumer curriculum materials are an advertising vehicle for their producers. Business-sponsored materials contain significantly more commercial content and advertising than do materials from non-business sponsors. The business-sponsored materials in this sample contain nearly twice as many advertising statements as the non-business materials: Business-sponsored materials contain an average of nearly 20 advertising statements per item. Corporations identified an average of nearly eight brands/models per item and referred to those brands/models nearly 50 times per item. Company and brand/model logos and names averaged a remarkable 82 per item. Trade associations identified an average of nearly eight products per item and referred to those products over 70 times per item. Clearly, the business community considers advertising of

products, brands/models, and corporations themselves to be a high priority in its free consumer curriculum materials.

There are important implications of this study for curriculum policy makers, for teachers, and for consumer educators in academia. Curriculum policy makers can no longer ignore the commercialization of their curricula through use of business-sponsored materials. It is clear that these materials are largely vehicles for advertising and are not primarily intended to serve an education function.

Classroom teachers, influential agents in the education process, must decipher curriculum policy and administer it to students. Ambiguous or non-existent policies regarding use of business-sponsored materials leave individual teachers with the primary gatekeeping responsibility. Because many teachers are inconsistent gatekeepers (at least when it comes to business-sponsored curriculum materials), business sponsors have a good chance that many of their materials will be used in the classroom.

The findings of this study provide two major challenges for consumer educators. First, consumer educators should see to it that the results of this study are given wide distribution to classroom teachers and consumer policy makers. Teachers and policy makers should be aware of the now empirically-verified commercial nature of business-sponsored curriculum materials.

Along these lines, efforts should be made to develop and disseminate to classroom teachers and educational policy makers improved guidelines for evaluating free consumer curriculum materials. Currently-available sets of guidelines contain evaluative criteria which are vague and provide little real guidance for classroom teachers.

Guidelines for businesses sponsoring curriculum materials are clear, but (as the present study shows) are frequently and blatantly violated in business-sponsored materials. It does not appear the business self-regulation in the area of consumer curriculum materials is effective.

A second implication of this study for consumer educators concerns the need for more research on the nature of consumer curriculum materials. Future research should include analyses of non-print materials, e.g., film, video and audio tape, slide, and film strip materials.

References

Dlabay, L.R., "The Opinions of Selected Illinois Secondary School Teachers Regarding Industry-Sponsored Instructional Materials," in Carol B. Meeks, (ed.), **Proceedings of the 28th Annual Conference of the American Council on Consumer Interests**, Columbia, MO: American Council on Consumer Interests, 1982, 64-67.

Harty, S., **Hucksters in the Classroom; A Review of Industry Propaganda in Schools**, Washington, DC: Center for Study of Responsive Law, 1979.

Nehmer, K.S. and R.D. Krey, (eds.), **Elementary Teacher's Guide to Free Curriculum Materials**, Randolph, WI: Educator's Progress Services, Inc., 1983.